

War Reporting: time to work with the civilians

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Reporting war is getting more dangerous, difficult and complicated but working with citizen journalists is one way of getting around the censorship, lack of resources and danger. That was the verdict of four top TV journalists reflecting on the coverage of the Gaza conflict a year ago at a [Polis panel debate](#).

Bowen of the BBC

I was surprised by the degree to which the 'traditional' reporters embraced the potential of citizen journalists as informal correspondents or stringers and as a source of material. When the chap from citizen photojournalism site [Demotix](#) got up to make his case he found he was pushing at an open door.

Jeremy Bowen (BBC Middle East Editor) and Alan Fisher (Al Jazeera) were both subject to the Israeli exclusion of journalists from Gaza during the invasion 12 months ago. Sherine Tadros (Al Jazeera English) was actually inside because her channel had a staffed bureau in Gaza. Louise Turner made the superb [Unseen Gaza](#) programme that told the story of how the media was excluded and the effect on the reporting of the conflict.

Jeremy Bowen defended the overall BBC coverage of the Gaza crisis but he was clear that his own reporting lost a significant dimension by not being there. But he pointed out that the same thing happened in Sri Lanka this year, and in that place there was no Al Jazeera or citizen journalism to provide an alternative source.

Bowen warned that reporting war has got vastly more complicated in the last 15 years as the authorities – including groups like Hesbollah – use public relations, manipulation and intimidation to restrict the news media.

It was clear from Sherine Tadros' passionate description of the appalling story that she had to report, that there is no substitute for being there – for acting as a direct witness.

And as her colleague Alan Fisher warned, journalists have to be very aware of how they are being pressurised, right down to the language used. Don't call the Israeli Army a 'Defence Force' if it is invading somewhere else, for example.

It was not clear whether the ban had actually worked for the Israeli authorities, because of the backlash from frustrated journalists. But Louise Turner felt that in the end it did distract and limit the western media.

What was interesting was the consensus that conventional ideas of balance are all but redundant in modern conflict where so often the sides are disproportionate. Tadros thought it was impossible to give equal weight when one side loses a few dozen while hundreds die on the other.

There was also a thoughtful debate around whether TV channels serving western audiences should show as much gore as Arab broadcasters routinely do. Bowen thought that the BBC could show more but as soon as you go too far it loses its impact. And both Fisher and Tadros agreed that to get the most impact, you don't have to resort to explicit horror. Louise Turner watched hours of rushes of stomach-churning imagery in the making of her documentary about Gaza and she said that the effect was to numb not to inform.

And if the professionals are under such pressure, is there a role for the citizen journalist? Jeremy Bowen was very happy with the work of the BBC interactive hub that fosters public participation. He saw it as a great way to garner more material as long as the broadcaster is transparent about where material is from.

Louise Turner called for much braver use of citizen journalism. Instead of just relying on citizen in places like London and New York, broadcasters should be tapping into networks in more remote parts of the world, she said.

And Al Jazeera's correspondents said that is precisely what they are doing, handing out cameras to people to report

for them beyond their network of bureaux.

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